

A Modern Mercenary.

By E. & H. HERON, Authors of "Tanner's Duel," Etc.

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Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

Maasau is a little duchy in Europe which has thus far maintained its independence because of the jealousy of the large countries. International affairs are now, however, at a critical stage and the little state seems about to be swallowed up. Germany is represented at Revende, the capital, by one of her ablest statesmen, Baron von Elmur, England's influence is felt to be great and the presence of Major Counsellor means much. It was through Counsellor that John Rallywood, a young countryman, had served seven years in the Maasau frontier cavalry. Rallywood is now to resign his commission and Selphord, the chancellor and "man of the hour," sends for him and makes him a gentleman of the guard. The gentleman of the guard is the appointment of Rallywood, and Selphord, one of the leaders and a stout, red-headed man, is the stranger. At the palace ball, Rallywood meets Valerie Selphord, the chancellor's daughter. She promises him the last dance, which will not take place until after the "affair," involving the honor of the guard has been settled.

CHAPTER V—CONTINUED.

Good Luck and a Firefly.

Rallywood did not dance again; he contented himself with following the movements of the black domino. After a time he joined a little group of "nobs" who were standing talking. One of the group presently detached himself and glanced round as if searching for someone. It was Rallywood of the guard. He quickly perceived that Rallywood and at once came toward him.

"Allow me to recall myself to your memory, Captain Rallywood; I am Selphord of the guard," said the other, with a slight bow and a smile which was not without a certain charm.

"That is something," replied Rallywood with a smile that belied his name. "We are somewhat exacting in our requirements for our men, but I am sure you will find it no more than a long memory—a long pedigree, for example, and a long sword."

"I have heard that also," said Selphord, glancing at him out of his pale, keen eyes. The fellow was too non-committal to please his taste. To sound a coward out of the corps promised infinitely less difficult and enjoyable than he had hoped for when he pledged himself to ride the guard of the Englishman. For perhaps the only time in his life he wished he were any other form but that of a man in uniform and gold, for he knew of the guard that it was often their "great name" that conquered.

Spurred by this thought, he looked Rallywood very straightly in the face, and the gleam of his eyes reminded the Englishman of glacier ice.

"Knowing so many of our peculiarities, perhaps Captain Rallywood may no longer care to join us," said the guardman.

Rallywood laughed with absolute good humor.

"I both care and dare," he said pleasantly.

"I am forgetting my errand," he said, with a slight change of tone. "I have been sent by a lady to bring you to her. Will you allow me?"

As they approached the group, the shorter of the two black dominoes spoke.

"You need not trouble to introduce Captain Rallywood, Anthony. We are already friends; we are not, monsieur?"

The sweet, high voice and the inconspicuous child-like face came upon Rallywood with a slight shock.

"I could hardly have dared to claim so much," he said, "but I cannot forget that Madame de Sagan."

She laid her hand with a suspicion of caressing familiarity on his arm.

"Hush, then! Do you not know that it is inadvisable to mention the name of a masked lady until the clock strikes midnight? Captain Rallywood has been stationed near the castle at Kofnord; we have therefore not occasionally continued the lady, addressing herself to Miss Selphord."

"Captain Rallywood is luckier than most of us," interrupted another voice. "He seems to have an enviable facility for appearing where we others in vain wish to be. Only last week—"

A tall, thin, dark man in a velvet coat, whose high, pointed ears and pointed nose, high cap and feather sparkled with lurid points of fire, Countess Sagan turned upon him.

"But, baron, where is then your domino? It is not yet midnight," she exclaimed, her hand still remaining on Rallywood's arm.

"Listen! Von Elmur raised his hand. 'The happy moment arrives when the beautiful faces we long to see'—He gave the rest of the sentence. The ear of Miss Selphord, who stood silently looking on at the little scene.

—my cousin Anthony Unzair, who desires perhaps herself, but most certainly her fortune, and our delightful German minister, who uses all means that he can to land to win Maasau for his master! But I should not say these foolish things to you, who are of the other party."

"They were dancing by this time, her head near his shoulder, her voice soft in his bending ear."

"Of the other party?" he repeated. "I flattered myself that you said something else."

"Yes, a friend; but I made a mistake—I have none—no, not one true friend," the voice said passionately in his ear.

"My husband?"

Rallywood almost lifted her clear of his embracing arms and then gently released her. In a vague way he felt the force of her appealing beauty as he had felt, it intermittently for some months past. It touched him for the moment, but he was apt to forget both it and the very existence of the woman herself directly he parted from her.

"Count Sagan is colonel-in-chief of the guard?" he asked, and the question seemed to fit in with her train of thought.

She made no immediate response, but with a light touch on his arm led him to a flower-banked apartment, about which a few couples were scattered in various convenient nooks. She sank upon a sequestered settee, and made room for him beside her.

"Yes, he is colonel-in-chief of the guard, because they think him too old to act any longer as its real commander. He was the first soldier in Maasau and the most unequal sportsman. He was all these things, and I am proud of them! But look at me!"

She rose languidly and stood before him. Rallywood saw a slight woman, tall and exquisitely fair, who carried her small head with its gleaming coronet royally. Her skin and her soft flushed cheeks had the pure evanescent quality of a child's complexion. Moreover, her chief charm was perhaps her air of childish innocence. Indeed, some of Sagan had seldom looked more lovely; she was honestly touched by self-pity, and was posing as the proud yet disillusioned wife of a man hopelessly older than herself, and for the time being she believed earnestly in that view of her lot.

"All these things have been," she said softly, her eyes filling with tears, "but I am! Can I ever be satisfied with what only was?" Rallywood's face altered. Like any other man in such a position, he felt immediately sorry for her. She saw the advantage she had gained, and at once the coquette awoke in her.

"Captain Rallywood," she sank down beside him again, "I need a friend in whom I can trust, who will ask nothing of me, but who will give me all the things I most want."

The interjection of this enigmatical speech was left to the ear, for the young countess was gazing at her big black hair, where luminous freckles hung tangled amongst the dusky feathers. Quickly, with some dissatisfaction, she became aware that Rallywood was not looking at her—as he should have been in the guard's secret show than Unzair's, but at a grave expression. Well, she knew she could make him look at her as she desired—yet. It was but a matter of time.

"I think you may count upon me," said Rallywood at last. He believed in her, which was good; moreover, he meant what he said; yet the speech was wholly lacking in the flavor which to the Countess Sagan was the flavor of life.

"After all, it is little to promise, and I may not need your friendship for very long," she replied, placing a glittering tiara from her fan and laying it on his sleeve with her sweet light laugh.

"Like a trooper I shall dance out my short night, and die quickly before life grows stale."

Rallywood took out his cigarette case of African leather work, and, lighting a pipe, he said to her with a smile of diamond dust into it.

"I don't like to hear you say that," he said in his quiet way, which the listener decided might mean so much or so little. "We must all go on some time, I suppose, but one always wants the beautiful things to live forever."

Meanwhile, can you spare me another dance?"

CHAPTER VI.

The Cloister of St. Anthony.

The night was drawing to a close. The long supper room was almost deserted. Amongst the lingerers were a few officers in the uniform of the guard, who stood talking together in one corner.

"The fellow has given you no chance," said one, saying solemnly.

"Have him in here! Kick him in here, if necessary," said Countess Sagan.

"I don't think you will find him so easy to kick," said Rallywood.

"I have spoken with him already this evening, and I—rather liked what he said."

ly, and turned on his heel to find himself face to face with Baron von Elmur and one or two officers of the frontier cavalry.

"There is about to be a storm, major, observed Elmur, passing Counsellor with a cool nod."

"So it seems. A storm in a teacup?" retorted the major, derisively.

Meanwhile, Rallywood, with the men of the cavalry, his old brother officers, behind him, advanced to meet Unzair. "We of the guard are hoping to break glasses with you gentlemen of the cavalry before the night is over," began Unzair, alluding to a fashion amongst the military contingent in Maasau of taking wine together and breaking the glasses afterwards as a sign of unalterable good feeling and mutual loyalty.

Unzair included Rallywood with the two officers beside him in this invitation, by a slight inclination of the head.

The three men accepted, but there was a little stiffening in the attitude of each, for Rallywood had friends here who were resolved, if only for the

system of the strong hand. That his life might be deliberately requisitioned by Selphord to forward some secret policy of his own was by no means an impossible supposition. Rallywood glanced at the clock. In another quarter of an hour he must either be dancing with Valerie Selphord or lying dead in the famous cloister of St. Anthony, which overlooked the river, and where many another man had died under much the same circumstances.

Rallywood laughed again and turned on his heel. At that period it did not seem to matter greatly which way it ended, but he was going to carry the undertaking through with what credit his wits afforded him.

In the meantime the cloister of St. Anthony had been lit up from end to end with a brilliant light, and while the other two seconds went to fetch their respective principals to the spot Adiron and Adolf exchanged a word or two as they waited.

"The Englishman took it very well," remarked Adiron.

"Devilish well," blazed little Adolf.

satisfaction in this life, because he was worthy of it.

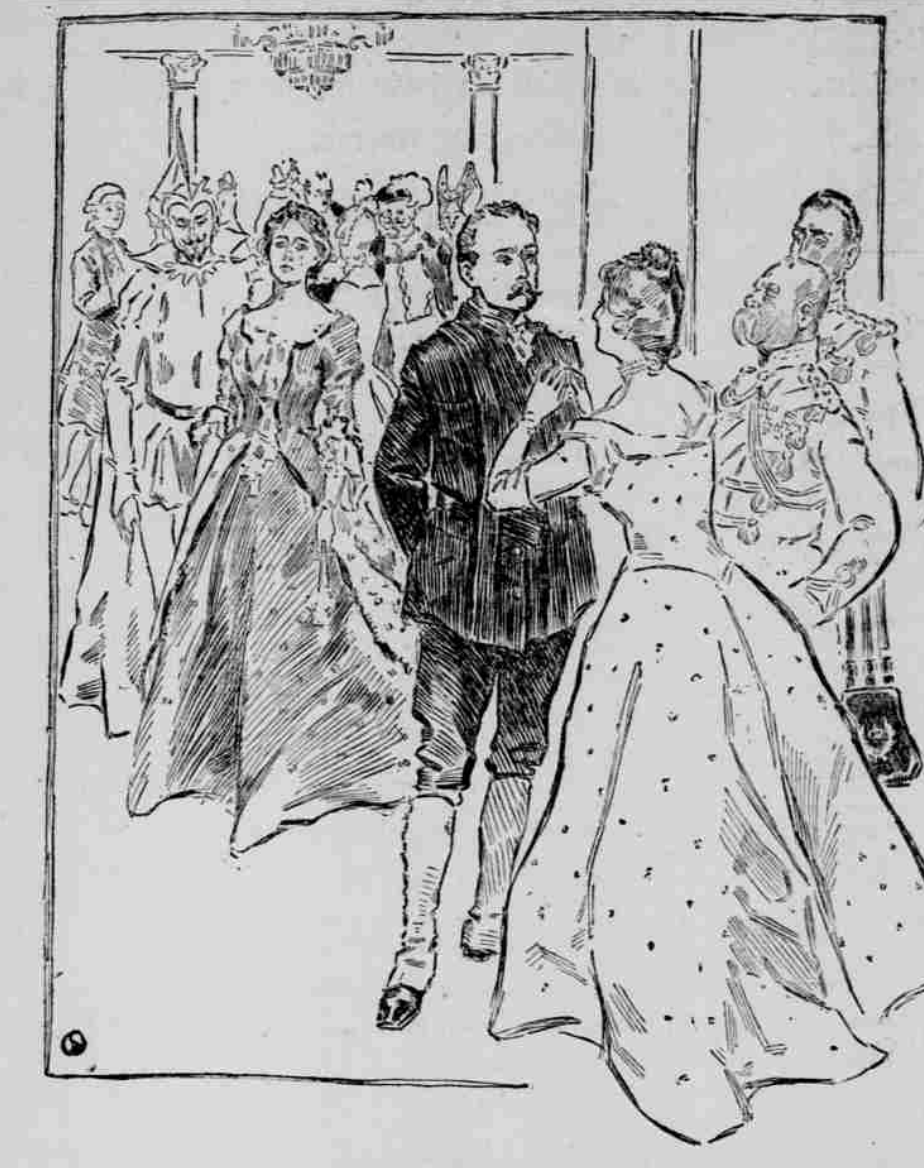
"If Lieutenant Unzair chooses to withdraw his opinion," he said, "of course Captain Rallywood will not go any further into the matter. For the most part, he has an appointment in less than seven minutes. On his behalf I can but insist that his suggestion affords the only possible way out of the difficulty."

Reluctantly the other men yielded. Rallywood had gained a moral advantage. If he were destined to die, he would die in a manner that would go down into the history of the guard. Hastily and in accordance with the request of Rallywood the change of procedure was explained to Unzair.

The two opponents stood absolutely still. Rallywood's face wearing the expression of one who is politely interested in something that is happening to somebody else.

At the signal Unzair raised his pistol and fired.

Rallywood stood in his place for some thirty seconds, while there was a sound



Madame de Sagan's Blue Eyes Glanced Up Into Rallywood's Face As Her Fingers Touched His Breast.

honor of the frontier corps, to see their late comrade through the coming long night.

Before the wine filled the glasses, Adolf was already deep in the story of Unzair's shooting match with Abenfeldt.

"Allow me the honor of drinking with you, monsieur," said Countess Sagan to Rallywood. "It was in truth a notable performance; we have never had even in the guard a sorer shooter than Unzair."

Rallywood had just time to make up his mind and determine upon his course of action.

The glasses clinked together and then clashed upon the floor, when the men set their heels upon them. Then Rallywood turned to Unzair.

"I compliment you, Lieutenant Unzair," he said, "I already knew that you were a swordsman not easily to be matched, since, in fact, the little affair at Alfau, when I had the pleasure of acting as your second, that the pistol is a deadly and deadly matter."

Unzair set his shoulders back with an indelible suggestion of scornful defiance.

"I ask you to state precisely what you mean, monsieur," he answered.

"I mean that although a man may shoot and number of swallows, it does not follow that he can hit a man at, say, twenty paces," Rallywood spoke deliberately.

The whole group of men listened in silence. Then Unzair leant toward Rallywood with a smile.

"We can but try," Captain Rallywood said.

Although everyone in their immediate neighborhood was listening from the other side of the hall they looked, no doubt, like a group of tall men gaged in the ordinary course of the day, with no more than a moderate distance.

"You have won the toss," remonstrated Unzair.

"Yes, undoubtedly. But I feel sure that Lieutenant Unzair will be kind enough to hold me to that, since it is evident that the first shot should be his."

Adiron grinned, and with a bow of showing many mixed emotions.

"I like your way of conducting a dispute, Captain Rallywood," he said, "but as your second I must warn you that it is the worst luck in the world to refuse a toss. You have won the toss. In declining to profit by it you are paying court to death."

Rallywood shrugged his shoulders.

"I may prove my point," he retorted, smiling.

As for that, it might be decided on a distant base later on, argued Adiron.

For the second time that night Rallywood looked at his watch.

"I have an engagement in seven minutes," he said. "I shall be glad if you will excuse my meaning to Lieutenant Unzair."

"As you wish," said Adiron; "but in case of accident I should wish to take the opportunity of saying to you now that in the whole range of my experience I have never derived more pleasure from the attitude of a principal than I have on this occasion from yours."

Adiron concluded with a bow and returned to the other seconds. Since the Englishman was determined to go to his grave in so excellent and gallant a fashion, he was not to be deterred.

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of splintering glass as the bullet rushed into the darkness above the river; then he advanced, smiling.

"It seems," he said, "that I was right."

Unzair stared at him.

Rallywood handed his pistol to Adiron, and, bowing to the assembled men ceremoniously, he went on.

"I hope we may consider the affair concluded, and as I am engaged for the dance, that is about, to begin, I trust you will excuse me."

And with another bow he was gone. No one spoke for a little while, then Unzair walked toward the others with no very pleasant face. That Rallywood had done a thing above reproach, and in a manner above reproach, made it none the easier for his pride to accept the result. But he was above all considerations true to himself—to Anthony Unzair.

"Captain Rallywood has made his point and a reputation," he said at last. "I think, Countess, you will agree with me that as men of honor we must consider the matter ended."

"In and Captain Rallywood's favor?" asked Countess Sagan.

"Certainly. What do you say, gentlemen?" Adiron spoke, with warmth.

"I suppose we must concede that it was neatly done, and that Captain Rallywood deserves his success," agreed Adolf with some constraint.

Unzair's generosity rose to the occasion.

"Our gain in the guard is your loss in the cavalry, Colonel Jenard," he said handsomely.

Jenard acknowledged the implied compliment and went off leaving the three guardsmen together.

"We shall have to swallow the Englishman after all," said Countess Sagan, blackly.

"How come you to miss him, Unzair?"

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partner coming," she answered as Rallywood came toward them.

Wallenough looked down at her with some reproach.

"This fellow?" he said.

"But why?" she replied with a little smile. "Is he not of the guard? Can I aspire to anything higher?"

"Captain Rallywood is not yet of the guard," said the old soldier; "but he is a good deal better than the rest of the guard, without giving any symptom of having recognized Rallywood beyond his scornful words."

"I have come, mademoiselle," said Rallywood.

The girl's pale cheeks were now touched with a delicate carnine, such as shines between the fingers of a hand held up against a light. The flush seemed to lighten and enhance her beauty, or rather it lent her a novel kindling charm that struck home upon Rallywood's mood.

"What have you been doing to me?" she asked with interest.

"Treaking glasses with the guard," he replied.

"That ceremony occasionally includes the use of a sword or a pistol."

"Are you then also a diplomatist?" she asked with quick scrutiny.

Rallywood pulled his moustache. He did not pretend to understand women, but that Miss Selphord should now despise him for escaping a danger she had half an hour ago trembled over and prayed to avert, seemed at best rather inconsistent.

"I have attempted to be diplomatic, but I have not been successful."

"Diplomacy was never meant," she said, looking frowningly at him.

"What do you suppose he meant," she asked, bitterly, "knowing you had to deal with the guard?"

"Ah!" and a slow smile dawned in his eyes. "I wonder what he meant, knowing I had to deal with the guard?"

Valerie frowned again; her words were not particularly expedient under the circumstances, but she disliked having them flung back at her.

"I beg your pardon, Of course I know nothing of—of these things. I know nothing of you only. But I thought, and I am sorry for the mistake, that you looked like a man."

"There was a little of you behind her as she was about to turn away, and Colonel Wallenough strode up hurriedly.

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